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Contact: Renee Miscione, 212-264-0424

renee.miscione@gsa.gov

Brian Feeney, 212-219-7151

brian_feeney@nps.gov

Bernice Green, 212-219-7298

bgreen@uniworldgroup.com

For Immediate Release

Ceremonial Groundbreaking for African Burial Ground Exterior Memorial Conducted at National Historic Landmark Site

NEW YORK – The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), in partnership with the National Park Service (NPS), the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and architect Rodney Léon, took part in a ceremonial groundbreaking to mark the site of the African Burial Ground memorial in New York City.

Speaking to the crowd, GSA Administrator Stephen A. Perry commented: “Today we mark the ground where the African Burial Ground memorial will be built, and where it will stand forever as a monument to the 17th and 18th century enslaved Africans who rest here. The memorial will educate visitors about the harsh living conditions under which they toiled, the customs they added to our culture, and the many contributions they made to colonial America.” Perry, along with Donald W. Murphy, Deputy Director of the National Parks Service, also introduced and recognized the memorial design advisors who attended the ceremony.

The event, coordinated by the Schomburg Center, included the participation of local high school students, members of the faith community, the diplomatic corps, local, national and foreign leaders, and government officials. Howard Dodson, Director of the Schomburg Center addressed the gathering as well as directed the participants, including local school children, in the ceremonial marking of the ground as they placed banners bearing the Sankofa symbol in the ground, around a section of the area where the memorial will be sited.

The formal rite and blessing followed the announcement by Murphy of the NPS' recommendations for management of the site. "The National Park Service has been privileged to assist with the memorialization and planning for the future of the African Burial Ground" said Murphy. "In working with the descendant African community and others, the National Park Service has prepared Draft Recommendations for the African Burial Ground. We look forward to receiving public comment on the draft recommendations for this National Historic Landmark."

Rodney Léon, designer of the permanent memorial, also addressed the crowd. In his comments regarding the memorial he has noted: "My design tells the story and speaks to the greatness of a people who never ceased to push for freedom. Their story began in Africa, and the origin of my design was born there too. By traveling to Africa and incorporating the shapes and forms, as well as the essence of the culture and people, I have created a *living* memorial to the ancestors and their stories."

Although he was not able to attend today's ceremony, Congressman Charles B. Rangel of New York's 15th Congressional District, a strong supporter of this project, has stated: "This beautiful memorial is of national and international significance for those of us who are African Americans as well as other people of African descent worldwide. It will stand as a permanent symbol of our caring and concern that our ancestors buried here receive their just recognition and respect."

In other news, Howard Dodson announced the Schomburg's annual *African Burial Ground: Celebration of the Ancestral Heritage Weekend*, September 30-October 2, describing the Weekend – which is free to the public– as a "multicultural, world tribute" to the African Burial Ground.

In addition to the preparation for the permanent memorial, the Heritage Weekend will focus on "Meditations on Compassion and Healing" acknowledging those whose lives have been ravaged by Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast, the Niger famine and Haiti suffering. Highlights will include a Youth Assembly & Ring Shout Ceremony with 1500 students; drumming and Jazz tributes, Russell Simmons Def Poetry, Open Mic presentations, and appearances by such artists as Wyclef Jean, Phylicia Rashad, MC

Lyte, Taye Diggs and cast members from Broadway's "Drumstruck", among others. For more information on the Ancestral Heritage Weekend, visit the African Burial Ground project website at: www.africanburialground.gov or call: (212) 491-2234.

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"...for all those who are not forgotten..."—Rodney Léon